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ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF CHILD LABOR

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We have discussed child labor within the past two or three days from different standpoints and chiefly as an economic or a social question. This afternoon we propose to look at its ethical significance. It is to be noted that all economic questions have a tendency to run into ethical questions, and that very naturally, illustrating merely the general principle that life is ethical. If conduct is three-fourths of life, then it is of small concern how automatic we make our actions from day to day; how much we develop ourselves into pieces of machinery; in the last sense, when we come to think about it, our actions are right or wrong, according as they are social or anti-social, are directed towards self as an end, or are directed toward the larger world that is outside of self. The old effort to divide life into two parts as sacred and profane has long been abandoned. We may not thus separate our days or our hours or our seasons, and we certainly cannot so separate the ordinary duties and activities. Even the ordinary labors of every-day life are under the sway of eternal laws.

The great economic problems of to-day group themselves largely around labor. These questions can never be considered from an individual standpoint. They are individual to be sure; they are private to be sure; and yet they are public as well as private, and they are social as well as individual. They concern the individual and they concern all society. They concern one group of citizens, and they concern the whole state. They are economic because they have to do with the material basis of society, and civic because they have to do with the foundations of government. They are business questions and yet they are in essence ethical questions. It is a common proverb that "business is business" and that proverb is used sometimes to discourage what is called sentiment in matters of this character. While it may be true that "business is business," it is in a larger sense true that business is ethics. The payment of debts is business and all business would be impossible without it,

yet the payment of debts is an ethical question and I suppose is about the most unpopular proposition that can be presented to any ordinary individual.

The great problems that group themselves around this labor question are the outgrowth of what has been called our commercial age, the outgrowth of that development of invention and discovery that has transformed human society within the past hundred years. This created the large manufacturing centers of the world and this created the wealth of the world; this has made steam and electricity the servants of man, has wrought one achievement after another, and transformed the very face of the earth as it has transformed human society.

Material Development More Rapid Than Ethical

I was reading a statement the other day that seemed very interesting. One hundred years or more ago, at the time of the application of machinery to industry, if some prophet could have foretold the extent to which all this was to be carried, could have seen how completely labor was to be dominated by these great inventions then coming to the front, that prophet would have dared to say, "Now at last is beginning the millennium, now at last human toil is ended, now at last poverty and unhappiness shall be banished from mankind." And yet John Stuart Mill has said that he very much doubts if all the inventions of all the labor-saving machinery in the world have lessened the hours of labor of any single individual. A great engineer said to me a few days ago, "So perfect is human machinery now that the power that is developed by burning a Sunday newspaper under the boiler of a great ship is enough to carry a ton of freight a mile." With that perfection of human machinery and human ingenuity, still there is more poverty and unhappiness and misery and division among men than ever before. All of this has kept pace, has moved right along beside our development in wealth, in science, in art. This leads men to think, it leads men to ask hard questions that they cannot answer. One thing seems to be true, and that is that human society has advanced materially more rapidly than it has advanced ethically. The driving power of human life has been a material one.

Our vital forces from a business standpoint have far exceeded the vitality and power of our ethical relations. We have made great

machines and we have cared for them, but we have killed men in the making; we have grown rich, but we have grown unhappy; we have builded great cities, but we have filled them with slums and with tenement houses. The questions as to the conduct of society are largely business questions. Some of us remember when the Louisiana lottery was up before the judgment of the people of this nation, how hard it was to answer the argument that the state required the money coming from that lottery in order to run its government. New York State is wrestling with a similar proposition in the question of gambling, and whenever these great ethical propositions come up, the answer to them, nine cases out of ten, comes from the realm of materialism; from the low basis of commercialism. For that reason it is very good sometimes to go back to the ethical basis of life. Therefore I lay down two or three general principles that I think we may accept and the acceptance of which, in my opinion, will do something to clear the atmosphere in the discussion of this whole question of child labor.

The Measure of Social Wealth

The first proposition is that the nature and aim of human labor is not human wealth but human weal; that society is interested in well-being more than well-living; that the end of civilization and the test of civilization are not in commercial statistics, not in the populations of states, not in the amount of manufacture, not in the wealth per capita, but in the character of citizenship and in the strength of the manhood and womanhood of the people.

I do not suppose we could give accurate statistics with regard to the production of the silver mines of Laurium to-day, but the schools of the Greek philosophers and the little State of Athens still rule the thought of the world. Crœsus does not cut much figure any longer in the markets of the world, but Socrates still plays a part. Our American life needs to take this lesson to heart.

We who boast of our citizenship; we who boast of the progress of our country, and who as loyal American citizens dream of the future that we shall complete in the march of events, we need to remember that our glory will not be in our population, that it will not be in Wall Street or in the strength of our banks, that it will not be in skyscrapers and the wealth represented by them, but if our glory is to be permanent it must be in the character of American citizenship.

Protection of Children Paramount

And I dare lay down another fundamental proposition on this topic. There are some duties that the state may neglect; there are some duties that the state may postpone, but a state may not neglect, may not postpone, its interest in protecting and developing the childhood of that state.

We are not so much concerned as we sometimes think we are as to our navies or our armies. It is a good thing to have a navy, especially if you happen to get into war, but we get up a great deal of unnecessary sentiment on these matters. For the past few weeks we have discussed the proper armor line of the great battleships, and yet every one of those battleships will probably be put on the junk-heaps without having an opportunity to settle that question by experiment. We develop a great amount of spectacular excitement over some question that is remote, as what will become of the Philippine Islands fifty or one hundred years from now, but we are disposed criminally to neglect the questions that lie immediately at our doors. That is why we see childhood, the childhood of America, sacrificed while we are debating over some abstract proposition. The state has no higher duty than the duty to care for its children; to protect them, educate them, provide means for their development; and that is the only issue where failure on the part of the state is absolute and without remedy. There is no salvation anywhere else. States may have divergent views about the tariff. One state may be for free trade and another for protection, and both may alike prosper. One state may be a military state, and another a peaceable state, and both be alike prosperous. They may have conflicting ideas on a great many propositions, but on this one proposition there is no room for division, no room for argument. The state that does not look after the children of the state is inviting its own destruction.

Individual Responsibility

The last proposition I lay down is this: that what is the duty of the state, what is the duty of society, becomes the duty and responsibility and privilege of the individual, not to be shirked by putting it off on some abstract organization that we call society or that we call the church or that we call the state. The funda-

mental difficulty of this whole proposition has been the lack of public interest in it. Why is it that we cannot have proper laws on this question of child labor? Is it because our students of economics are too ignorant to make suggestions to us? Not at all. Wise suggestions have been made over and over again. We know what a good child labor law is. Is it because our manufacturers so control things that we cannot have legislation? On the contrary, many of them are willing to enter into the support of reasonable legislation, and those that are not willing constitute but a small minority in society, and have no power of controlling the legislation of the state. The reason we have not a better condition of things in this country is that the Christian men and women of Atlanta and Nashville and New Orleans and every Southern city, and every city in this country, do not care for these things and are indifferent as to their children. This state of things will not be remedied except under the compelling law of human interest, and when we want these things we shall have them. My proposition, therefore, is that it is your duty and my duty to busy ourselves with the ethical concern of the state. It is somebody's business to take an interest in these things; it is somebody's business to say to capital, "You may mortgage the streets of our cities; you may bond our railroads; you may syndicate the water that we drink; you may lay hands on the very air that we breathe, but you shall not mortgage the childhood of this generation; you shall not blight in earliest bud the manhood and womanhood of the next generation."

We want the church to be busy about this matter. It will be a better thing for the churches to do than running the Wednesday night prayer meeting. We want the state to be busy about this. It will be a great deal better for the state to do this than to be holding some great political convention where the only serious proposition is whether one man shall go out and another man shall go in. We want the state to build its school houses, to build them all over the land, and to put the flag of our country above them, and we want the churches to build chapels and Sunday-school rooms and ring out the chimes from every steeple, and we want both state and church to cry out with the cry of that Master of men and lover of children, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."